

# Piano Perspectives



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## How Long Will a Tuning Last?

“How often should I get my piano tuned.” It’s a good and valid question, but I struggle a bit to answer it well.

Asking that question of a piano technician is something like asking a barber how often you need a haircut.

So many things influence the stability of a piano tuning—the design and condition of the piano, the amount of change in string tension that was necessary at the most recent tuning, and the degree of punishment the piano receives under the hands of its most energetic players. And there is always the tension between the desire for a



consistently satisfying playing experience and budgetary constraints. A piano in a high level performance venue gets tuned every time it is played. This is not an option for most of us.

Perhaps the most useful answer I have heard to this is one that was suggested to me by Mark Cramer, a very thoughtful and skillful piano technician whose activities include maintaining and managing the fleet of pianos at Brandon University's School of Music. His answer was direct, even if a little unsettling for us as piano owners.

***“Even on a very good instrument, a tuning typically lasts no more than one season.”***

This answer is based on the realities of climate that face us in southern Manitoba, especially the huge seasonal swing

in the levels of indoor relative humidity that we experience. This humidity swing is the single most significant factor that drives pianos out of tune.

The wooden soundboard of a piano is crowned; it is like a shallow dome that pushes up against the piano strings. When humidity rises, the soundboard takes on more moisture and expands, increasing the pressure it exerts against the strings. This causes the pitch of the piano to rise, usually in an uneven fashion across the scale. When the humidity drops, the opposite happens. In some cases, a piano tuned in the winter will go noticeably out of tune in the summer, and return to something more acceptable when the drier season approaches. But the rise and fall of humidity still takes its toll. The tuning does deteriorate.

But Mark added a second, very significant comment. ***“To get the most value from a tuning, you need to fool the piano into thinking the season hasn't changed.”*** In other words, you need to stabilize the humidity level to which the piano is subjected.

There are basically two approaches to humidity control. You can manage the humidity in the room (or the whole building) by using humidifiers and dehumidifiers or air conditioning, or you can manage the humidity inside the piano. Both methods can be effective, if carefully and consistently employed. You are probably already familiar with the the process of controlling humidity in a whole room. Here is an introduction to the alternative:

The ***Piano Lifesaver System*** by Dampchaser is a combination humidifier/dehumidifier system that allows you to maintain a stable environment inside your piano, even if you have your windows open in the summer and your room humidity fairly low in the winter. It is a low maintenance system that is economical to operate. It is humidistat-controlled, with indicator lights that show you when you need to add a couple of litres of water, which is about

every two weeks in the winter.

The *Piano Lifesaver System* does not eliminate the need for piano tuning, but it does keep the piano sounding better between tunings, and especially across changes in seasons. It is especially effective in vertical pianos, where airflow in and out of the case is quite limited. Effectiveness in grand pianos is enhanced by fabric bottom-covers and string-covers.

As a piano technician, I recommend and install the *Piano Lifesaver System*. Information is available on my website at <http://tuning.floydgadd.com>, or you can call and ask me to provide you with a free color brochure.

## Beware the Free Piano!

There is a smile on my face as I type the title of this article. I love a bargain as much as anyone, and I have benefited much from the kindness and generosity of others.

But sometimes a zero dollar price tag clouds our judgment. It is very important to be sure, before moving a piano into your home, that it is suitable for your intended purpose.

If you are looking for a piano for a beginner who wants to learn to play, it is extremely important to start with an instrument that rewards the student for the effort made to practice. While there are genuine bargains to be found, many free or low cost pianos, even many advertised as being in “excellent condition”, feature an attractive case with an interior in an advanced state of deterioration. Such pianos end up frustrating the learner. Many a student has given up in discouragement from struggling with an instrument that resists efforts to play expressively.



Most deficiencies in a piano can be corrected by a skilled piano technician. But in many cases, the cost of reconditioning a deteriorated instrument far exceeds the cost of buying the right instrument in the first place. Just as in the case of purchasing an automobile, there are great values to be had in the used market, but a fixer-upper is not always a bargain.

Having a piano technician examine a piano before you purchase it or move it into your home is not expensive, and can save you much money and grief. Most importantly, it can keep you from taking possession of a piano that will be an obstacle (and a very heavy one!) to what you really want.

If you are dealing with a family heirloom, a different set of factors comes into play. If the piano is a good candidate for rebuilding or reconditioning, it may well give you more satisfaction to invest the money in restoring it, rather than spending the money on a new or newer instrument. But I use the word “invest” carefully. The market value of a restored instrument is typically lower than the cost of restoring it. The value of the money spent is found in the pleasure of owning and playing the instrument.

If it is within your financial means to do so, seriously consider the purchase of a new or newer instrument, especially if it will be used by a piano student. Purchasing a good-quality instrument of significant value sends a powerful message to the student about the importance you place on what they are doing. Even if you are not sure the student will stay with lessons for the long term, remember that newer acoustic pianos maintain a significant resale value – more so than their electronic counterparts, and *far* more so than computers and automobiles. In Brandon, new pianos can be purchased at *Surridges Music Centre* (Yamaha) and *Creasy's Hot Tubs and Billiards* (Heintzman).

If you do purchase a piano privately, you will be faced with the task of moving it out of the seller's home and into your own. Seriously consider using the services of a professional mover, if for no other reason than that a professional will be insured against damage to both the homes and to the piano itself. And be assured, a 600 pound piano can do damage to floors and doorways, even if no stairs are involved. *Tim's Transfer* in Brandon has proven to be a competent and reliable piano mover.

If you are considering acquiring a piano for your home, either new or used, I would be happy to answer questions, and to be of assistance in helping you obtain a piano that will give you satisfaction for the years to come.

*Floyd Gadd is an Associate Member of the Piano Technicians Guild. This series of newsletters is archived at <http://tuning.floydgadd.com>.*